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# It's the Institution That Teaches

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Parents' Day at St. Olaf College is like Parent's Day at any number of small colleges. School has been in session about a month. The leaves on the maples are starting to turn. In the distance, one can hear the pep band warming up for the football game, while in lounge or classroom, parents of freshmen and teachers of freshmen stand about holding coffee cups and making awkward conversation. Awkward, because they tend to talk past each other. Teachers try to keep the conversation light, offering general information about their courses. They don't know their freshmen well yet. The parents are more serious, more specific. They want to know, "How is Karen doing?" "Is Paul working as he should in your class?" "Does David seem happy, interested? Has he told you any of his own ideas?" Unexpressed, at a deeper level is implied, "Did we make the right choice? Is this the right place for our son or daughter? As a teacher, do you represent what we looked for, what we hoped for when this choice was made?"

We begin with a reminder of this familiar scene in which we have all participated, many of us both as parents

and as faculty members, to get us thinking of the wholistic kind of judgment parents cannot escape. They must in some way assess what Warren Bryan Martin calls the "character" of a college.

Though the questions parents ask seem somehow both too broad and too personal to be answered readily, they are not superficial. They are, in fact, the appropriate questions to be asked by the person from outside, the "consumer" who is faced with the decision of "which college"? If one is attempting to compare one college as a unit with another in order to know where one can purchase the best education, one must know the overall effect of the college on the student.

From inside, however—from the dean's point of view, for example—there is little time to ponder such questions. Faced with urgent decisions about salary, retention, tenure, and promotion, an administrator must give first priority to the questions about how well individuals are doing their jobs, who is good, and who is not. The task of managing a college leads the dean and his or her supporting staff to seek clear and unambiguous measures of teaching performance. And, as the dean is likely to say, one "needs all the help one can get."

To give not proof but illustration, Peter Seldin conducted a workshop on faculty evaluation on our campus last fall. His work represents a well-founded moderate position on evaluation of teaching. Both of the two main substantive sections of the workshop, on colleague evaluation and student evaluation of teaching, began with a series of statements about teaching and its evaluation which, after some discussion, Seldin identified as either true or false "based on literally thousands of studies." He then suggested the means he had found to be most useful and reliable for rating faculty, endorsing instruments such as student evaluation forms which, he said, though not accurate enough to permit fine discriminations, do an excellent job of separating out the clearly superior and the clearly inferior from the large cluster of teachers in the middle. Our dean found this approach most helpful and had no trouble with such words as "inferior" and "superior"

even though they ignore the different contributions made by different teachers and line them up according to a set of standardized criteria. The implication of this choice of question is significant, for no matter how thorough the research, how reliable the results, viewed through the calibrated lens of a standard method of measurement, teaching by one teacher is seen to differ from another only in degree and not in kind. Without intending it, this makes invisible to the evaluator the variety, contrast, and counterpoint that make the human experience of getting an education different from the programming of a computer.

Last year George had a very nice experience. A young woman graduate introduced him to her fiance as "the best teacher I ever had." That helped him to forget, but obviously he cannot completely forget, the student evaluation form he also received. Down the page it was marked with the lowest rating on every item, and, at the bottom, the student had written: "This has got to be the worst course in the history of the college." The history of the college! Was he that bad? Or was he as good as that lovely and obviously intelligent young woman seemed to think?

Faculty members like to entertain one another by sharing "paradoxes" like this that come from the experience of teaching. Here are some more.

A very able scientist we know tells this story about how he learned the intricacies of advanced chemistry in graduate school. "This teacher gave us problems to solve; but he was so terrible in class, no one could make heads or tails of what he told us about solving them. So, we students had to get together and work out the answers ourselves. He was the worst teacher I ever had, . . ."; then, in the same breath, ". . . but I never worked so hard, and I have never forgotten how to do those problems."

Or the student who answered the question, "What is the best learning experience you have had so far?" by saying, "This summer I worked in a canning factory."

Bart Starr said of the teaching effectiveness of his coach, Vince Lombardi, "He knew who needed sugar and who needed salt."

Finally, there was old Art Paulson, teacher of creative

writing. Gullible? Students said so. "Oh, you can B.S. in your papers for him. Just say anything you want, and he will find all kinds of great stuff in there. He will call you in, and tell you you have great potential." How they laughed!—All those sophisticated students who knew that the effective method of getting grades was to find out exactly what the teacher wanted and give it to him. But "simple" Art Paulson gave them the permission and the confidence to try to say in their writing what they wanted to say and, in the process, unlocked creative potential.

If we were preachers, we would choose for our scripture lesson for educators a verse from Psalm 37: "The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord and he delighteth in his way. Though he fall he shall not be utterly cast down for the Lord upholdeth him with his hand." We like it, not only because it anticipates by two and a half millenia an emphasis on positive reinforcement—that is, a Lord who delighteth in the way of a good man, and no doubt shows it—but because of the paradoxical line, "Though he (the student) fall he shall not be utterly cast down." Part of what students learn must be learned by falling. Sometimes students need criticism, though they rarely like it. The "fall" may bring about a bruise from bumping up against subjects that violate preconceptions or jolt them out of complacency by making them stretch efforts and methods of study. All of these harsh experiences may be important in learning, but falling does not result in learning if students are utterly cast down. The falls must be turned into positive outcomes in the context of a larger environment of stimulation and support.

In George's subject, sociology, students come to class for the first time already "knowing" answers. After all, they have lived in society for eighteen years. The task of the first teacher is, therefore, to open them up by creating some doubts. He or she sticks out a foot, and they trip over it. The next teacher has the gratifying assignment of picking them up again, providing closure—and in the process garnering high ratings from impressed and grateful students.

This gives us a clue, we think, to resolving the paradoxes.

They are only paradoxes to those who, like administrators, perceive the college experience as an accumulation of classes and who assume in consequence that a class with a teacher qualified in his or her subject and measurably popular with students is a unit. Enough of these make an education.

On the contrary, it is the combination of experiences in the institution as a whole that teaches. College is an environment, not a log with a teacher at one end and a student at the other. It is the different, interactive, contrapuntal ways that challenge and support are provided that meet the growing, changing needs of the student. It is the juxtaposition or alternation of expert authority and student initiative, of success and striving, of answers and questions which result in education. In fact, it is the whole institutional experience (including "bad" experiences) in classes, in dormitories, in athletics, leading and following, performing and watching, working and relaxing. Everything counts.

Complex organizations are not just aggregates of similar units but combinations of different ones like living organisms with a division of labor among the necessary parts—heart, kidneys, lungs, brain. And it is complex organizations that do the work of the world today. Hospitals cure the sick, manufacturing plants make airplanes and airlines fly them—and colleges, not individual teachers, teach the young.

What difference would it make at our colleges if we believed and consciously worked from the idea that it is the whole institution that teaches? Certainly, we would look more carefully at the sequence of experiences that we provide. We might plan a program of slowly increasing difficulty which brings high school students—which is what entering freshmen are—gradually into the kind of experiences appropriate for college students, rather than throwing them in to sink or swim. The role of advisor, in which we are beginning to see educational meanings that go beyond planning a schedule and seeing that requirements are met, would become even more to be the student's advocate in fulfilling the broader purposes of his or her

education, not only sound preparation for a vocation but also for a high quality of life.

We would recognize as part of education the various aspects of campus life—the activities that go on, or don't go on, in dormitories, for example, and the importance of designing those buildings and activities to relate to academic experience. We would plan extracurricular activities as opportunities to express, practice, and test what is being encountered in classes. Teachers would have more reason to communicate about the students themselves, to share information about their abilities as well as what and in what manner they are being taught. Sequenced courses within the same department and in related disciplines would become the rule rather than continuing the assumption that what we do in our own classes is our own business.

Turning attention from the student to the institution, such a conviction about the teaching institution would bring more effective integration throughout the organization. The administration and members of the faculty would have to take one another more seriously, and shared efforts could diminish stereotypes: administrators might not regard faculty as absent-minded inhabitants of an ivory tower, nor would faculty regard administrators as adversaries or unconcerned with the process of teaching. Such functions as admissions, coaching, and teaching would cooperate to enhance the education of the student athlete who is now often vulnerable to conflicting points of view among them. We would be aware of the educational role of secretaries and clerical personnel, some of whom spend as much time in direct contact with students as do some faculty.

Believing that the institution teaches has implications for administrative policy. Clearly, expectations for the teacher would go beyong the classroom. Teachers teach by their presence at social gatherings, on ceremonial occasions, and as audience for student performance. They should be encountered in a variety of settings, to be available to students for more than questions about content, assignments, or tests. Such criteria, therefore, would play a part in the hiring process. It would become important to examine not

only the candidate's preparation in his or her content area but in the style and skills of teaching he or she brings. Criteria for a particular position might include the level of difficulty at which the person works best or the particular kind of teaching objectives espoused. We would ask about philosophy of education, not to achieve uniformity but to complement and extend the teaching resources of the institution.

We say optimistically that these things could happen. Of course, people would have to make them happen—but the whole academic community would have more reason to do so.

Implementation could begin now in two ways. First, an evaluation system that recognizes that there are many kinds of good teaching and that students need to encounter a wide range. They need to be helped through material that is difficult; they also need to deal with difficult material by themselves. They need to be disciplined to follow a line of information or reasoning out to the end; they also need to learn to explore, to experiment, to reject an implied conclusion in order to arrive at their own. They need to learn to work with ideas and to play with ideas, to listen with serious and focused attention, and to think for themselves. They need generous praise and serious criticism. No one teacher can combine all of these, probably not even both aspects of any one pair. So, we can make sure that the evaluation system allows people to show their strengths rather than expecting all to conform to one standard.

Secondly, departmental planning could include these aspects of teaching, following guidelines similar to those we already use in making decisions about curriculum content and who will teach it. Just as a department now agrees on different content areas to be taught, it could agree on its needs in terms of teaching style or function, saying: "We must provide within the department supportive teachers and demanding teachers, recruiters and socializers, information-givers and listeners." Particular individual preferences, styles, and areas of content specialty, would play their part in deciding who is doing what and what else needs to be done.

Beyond these immediate steps are larger questions of strategy and structure for which we will need research on the long-term effect of different experiences on the learning of students and the nature of the interactions between those experiences. What kind of experiences cause students to grow and broaden? What disillusions and what inspires? How much failure is necessary to success? How important is it that a student be happy about what and how he or she is learning? The more we learn about the relationships between the various elements in this complex, four-year journey, the more effectively we can plan and design institutions for total educational effect.

It is not our objective to press for particular outcomes but rather to raise the basic questions of orientation. We contend that the focus of higher education should be on the many-faceted experience that makes up a student's college career. Development of a whole organization for education is the key, and successful organizations, from orchestras to manufacturing plants, provide models from which colleges may selectively borrow. Winning teams in professional sports are a particularly interesting place to look, for competition clearly shows which teams are superior. Two winning strategies in football will illustrate. Bo Schembechler of Michigan maps out a plan of attack and defense, and then his recruiters go out and find just those individual players to make it work. Bill Walsh of the San Francisco Forty Niners develops a plan of attack and defense around those players he has available. Both strategies require comprehensive planning and a different kind of excellence at every position. So does education.